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Literary Geology: A Critical Proposal for the Reading of Place. The Case of Fabio Pusterla

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ABSTRACT

Geology allows us to visualise events that are so distant in time and alien in materiality, thereby challenging the concept of place as a fixed entity. This article introduces Literary Geology as a critical approach for reading a place and its temporalities in literature through an analysis of Fabio Pusterla's poetry. Literary Geology draws on Material Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, Literary Geography and Doreen Massey's theory of place as event. By examining geological matter and perspectives, Literary Geology explores representations of place within the temporalities of the Anthropocene. In doing so, this approach addresses the socio-political contexts that shape places, particularly in the midst of current geographical transformations. The article first presents the theoretical foundations of this approach and then analyses the 'spaces of collapse' that Pusterla creates to represent the border between Italy and Switzerland. Through this analysis, the article questions the role of borders in place-making and identity demarcation.

KEYWORDS

Literary Geology; Deep Time; Material Ecocriticism; Geocriticism; *Anthropocene Poetics*; Fabio Pusterla

Introduction

The subterranean is a recurrent motif in both literature and criticism: from metaphors of the unconscious or the repressed, to allegories of regression and origins that lead to narratives of rootedness and belonging. In this article, the realms of the subterranean and geology are examined as elements revealing the depth and temporality of space. Indeed, the geological perspective emphasises the coexistence of history and nature. Space and time 'are implicated in each other', as the imagination of one influences the perception of the other, and vice versa.[1]

Geology is a practice for the reading of place where space and time coincide on an ongoing basis. In Adelene Buckland's words, 'place, in a geological world, *is* time'.[2] Many studies on space consider the traces and stratifications of the past in defining individual places, and even in shaping the very concept of place itself.[3] Geologic deep-time allows us to read the place as a process, not only in

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[1]Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Sage, 2005), p. 18.

[2]Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 150–51.

[3]Among many, see Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skills* (Routledge, 2000) and, for a literary-oriented perspective, Serenella Iovino, *Paesaggio civile: Storie di ambiente, cultura e resistenza* (Il Saggiatore, 2022). The dimension of depth is metaphorically suggested also in those disciplines that deal more specifically with the representation of place. For instance, one of the tenets of Westphal's Geocriticism is the 'stratigraphic vision', which emphasises the fact that literary representations provide evidence of the diverse perceptions of places across different historical periods (Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism*, trans. by Robert T. Tally Jr. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 137). Similarly, in his studies on travel narratives, Cronin uses the term 'vertical travel' to define how travel writers focus on 'the particulars of place either in space (botany, studies of micro-climate, exhaustive exploration of local landscape) or in time (local history, archaeology, folklore)'; Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language and Translation* (Cork University Press, 2000), p. 19.

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natural terms, but also in the affecting and relativising dynamics of place-making, identity constructions, and territorial organisation. The organisation and production of space, as well as the rhetoric of grounding in nature and belonging, are necessarily redefined and contextualised by the Anthropocene, considered not only a '*pseudo*-geological' concept, but also a broad set of geographical processes and transformations that are already underway.[4]

With this contribution, I propose the foundation of 'Literary Geology', a new critical approach to reading place in literature. This method is developed through the combination of disciplines such as Ecocriticism (specifically, Material Ecocriticism), Geocriticism and Literary Geography. By analysing representations of geological matter and the geological perspectives found within texts, my intention is to explore the possibilities of representing and analysing places within the temporalities of the Anthropocene. My aim is not only to observe representations of a place's temporal framework or identity but also to observe the socio-political interconnections that continually create and define places, especially in light of the urgency posed by physical and human geographical changes.

In order to do this, I will analyse the work of the Swiss-Italian poet Fabio Pusterla, paying particular attention to the *spaces of collapse* he creates to represent the Swiss-Italian border place, and to challenge the concept of the border itself. In his texts, the fixity of borders is contested by his use of many images of collapse and decay, brought about not only by natural elements – such as Alpine erosion, rockfalls, earthquakes and floods – but also by waste, litter, rubble, and abandonment which define the space and the landscape of the urbanised Swiss-Italian frontier zone. Geological images and stratigraphic perspectives frequently recur in Pusterla's work, and these are instrumental to the presentation of my critical proposal. His poetry follows an explicit *ecocentric* trajectory which inevitably questions human space-time, while testifying to the poet's growing awareness of the temporality and the geographies of the Anthropocene.[5] Through Literary Geology, I demonstrate that, in Pusterla's work, the representation of place highlights the process of change which consequently challenges the spatial and political organisation of boundaries, as well as the rhetoric of belonging based on nature or on the fallacious notion of intrinsic indigeneity. Pusterla's ecosystems of collapse question the perceived fixity of places and spatial organisation as symbolised by the border and its functions. The abundance of geological imagery in Pusterla's work makes it an ideal case study for presenting my approach. However, I believe this approach will also be fruitful for examining the temporality of any given place in literary texts – whether in poetry or prose – through geological and stratigraphic elements.

This contribution is divided into a theoretical and an analytical part. In the first part, I develop the theoretical and methodological approach I referred to when defining Literary Geology. I acknowledge my debts to Material Ecocriticism, particularly regarding the concept of the narrative agency of matter, and to Geocriticism and Literary Geography, because of my primary focus on place and geographical issues. I then briefly explore the contributions that various critical approaches dealing with the theme of the underground in literature can provide to the relationship between literature and the Anthropocene. Consequently, I expand the concept of place as a process, largely drawing from the theories of the geographer Doreen Massey. In doing so, and always bearing in mind the urgency and modes of geographical changes in the Anthropocene, I intend not to overlook the political dimension closely linked to both the concept of place and geology.

In the second part of the article, I focus on Pusterla's work as an exemplary case study, analysing his poetic creation of what I term as *spaces of collapse*. I present some texts in which geological elements and perspectives provide new ways to perceive and represent place, questioning politics and identity rhetoric as elements of the Swiss-Italian border space – within the geographies and the

[4]On the definition of the Anthropocene as a *pseudo*-geological concept, i.e., not openly recognised by geologists but, nevertheless, 'used primarily to mark a threshold in human historical self-understanding', see Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 21.

[5]See Alice Loda, 'Eco-Pusterla. A semantic-stylistic analysis of Bocksten', *Incontri*, 35 (2020), pp. 99–115, doi:10.18352/incontri.10337. Pusterla himself discusses his relationship with the Anthropocene and ecology in Stefano Modeo, 'Poesia & Ecologia, conversazioni con Fabio Pusterla', *Atelier*, 97 (2020), pp. 52–54.

temporalities of the Anthropocene. Pusterla's first space of collapse pertains to the natural/geological domain, where erosion and natural disasters attack and destroy human signs of spatial appropriation. Similarly, in the second space of collapse, the geological perspective reveals the stratifications of the Italian-Swiss border. Amidst debris and waste, the poet presents a biological, spatial, and poetic alternative to the identity constructions linked to the border space. Thus, I also focus on Pusterla's conception on time and space through images of transit and border crossing, which ultimately define humanity and its relationship with place.

Literary Geology

Literary Geology bridges the realms of literature, geology, and geography. Rooted in the profound interconnections between human narratives and scales, and geological matter and perspectives, this concept explores the complex relationship between literature and the subterranean world, challenging traditional notions of stability and belonging in the ever-changing geographies of the Anthropocene. Literary Geology engages with the narratives inscribed within geologic matter, unravelling new temporalities that reframe place as a dynamic process, an event constantly shaped by human interactions, political decisions, and environmental forces.

Theory and Methodology

Literary Geology is linked to both Ecocriticism and Geocriticism. In particular, there are significant resonances with Material Ecocriticism, especially concerning the idea that matter possesses a dimension of textuality, that is, it 'produces ongoing configurations of signs and meanings that can be interpreted as stories'.[6] For example, in his analysis of the narrative potential of elements such as sulphur, oil, marble, steel, asbestos, and asphalt, Enrico Cesaretti demonstrates the centrality of the interaction between matter and human practices, both in the shaping of the Italian landscape and in the production of imaginaries.[7] Similarly, the geologic matter works as a text in which to read the strata of environmental and geographical changes, and the temporality of places – encompassing both the past and the future.[8] The narrative of geological epochs is based on strata, subsoil and rocks; geological matter can be read as signs through which to imagine and narrate the transformations of the Anthropocene.

In delineating Literary Geology, I intend to consider the interconnections of matter with those geographical features – both cultural and political – that create and shape places. Geology intersects with cultural discourses, political decisions, and processes of spatial production. Therefore, since I confine my focus to the realm of literary representation as a tool for understanding place, I consider the contributions of Geocriticism and Literary Geography to be crucial. These disciplines, in their various forms, analyse texts to observe dynamics of place-making, the diverse identities of a place through its representations, and establish connections between texts and a specific geocultural context.[9]

[6]See Serpil Opperman, 'Nature's Narrative Agencies as Compound Individuals', *Neohelicon*, 44.2 (2017), pp. 283–95, doi:10.1007/s11059-017-0394-9. Regarding the textuality of matter, I refer to *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 6.

[7]See Enrico Cesaretti, *Elemental Narratives: Reading Environmental Entanglements in Modern Italy* (Pennsylvania University Press, 2020).

[8]On the narrative potential of geologic matter, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minnesota University Press, 2015) – especially for the concept of *Geophilia* and the idea that stones convey messages over long time spans. An example of how the study of rocks can provide *future* information and insights into the Anthropocene can be found in Miguel Gomez-Heras, and Stephen McCabe, 'Weathering of Stone-built Heritage. A Lens Through Which to Read the Anthropocene', *Anthropocene*, 11 (2015), pp. 1–13, doi: 10.1016/j.ancene.2015.12.003.

[9]See, among many others, Sheila Hones, *Literary Geography* (Routledge, 2022); Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012); Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (Routledge, 2013); Westphal, *Geocriticism*.

I do not aim solely to define or question the identity or history of a specific place, nor do I focus solely on analysing the representations of geological themes. Instead, my goal is to provide additional analytical tools for understanding modes of representation and reading places within broader processes that can no longer ignore the Anthropocene and geographical changes. As noted by Jennifer Wenzel, 'the understanding of the way rocks and ruins were reproduced or "written" [. . .] shaped the way they were presented or "read": [and] this insight has interesting implications for the relation between literary production and reception in the Anthropocene'.[10] Thus, Literary Geology aims to engage elements of history and geography (understood as human productions of the relationship with space and time, encompassing political dynamics, notions of belonging, and the organisation and management of territory) with a different spacetime framework, that of geology.

Geology and Anthropocene

While the focus of this article is on the representation and the reading of place, the various manifestations of the relationship between (literary) theory and the subterranean world can provide a valuable contribution within the broader context regarding the allegorical, symbolic, and metaphorical meanings attributed to the Anthropocene and the geological perspective.[11] Niccolò Scaffai, for example, refers to the underground as a 'metafora guida', tracing the origins of current environmental phenomena and looking for 'modelli alternativi di reazione alla crisi ecologica'.[12] The excavation of the underground is always a moment of discovery, and the recognition of geological deep-time and different time scales works as an enigmatic upheaval of our knowledge and conception of space, the environment, and time itself.

As noted by Francesco Orlando, items like relics, fossils and monumental ruins are used as symbols and signs of the past; their function, in literature, is clear.[13] Similarly, geologic matter provokes the perception of different temporalities, while also carrying other meaning. Studying the representation of stones in authors like Breton, Bachelard and Caillois, Roberta Coglitore categorises the various functions that the subterranean realm and minerals can take: from distrust in progress to the search for refuge, and even to the contemplation of pure forms grounded in nature. Coglitore observes that fantasies about geologic matter vary according to the taste of the era and the dominant visual culture.[14] From this aesthetic perspective, the Anthropocene could also be considered as part of a cultural climate that influences, among other things, the reading and representation of places.

Deep-time, conceptually, opens the door to the definition and investigation of the Anthropocene and its literary representations. This is evident in more recent texts closely related to Ecocriticism, such as Menely and Taylor's *Anthropocene Reading* and Farrier's *Anthropocene Poetics*.[15] Recognising contemporary environmental crises also as crises of meaning, these works start from geology to delineate a range of perspectives on the relationships between literature, poetry, and the Anthropocene. These perspectives aim not only to comprehend the geological era in which we live but also to explore how the Anthropocene can help shape a different perspective on literature.

The discipline of geology itself has a significant literary component. Conceiving deep-time and other issues related to place, scale, and measurement has always been a challenge for geology. For

[10]Jennifer Wenzel, 'Stratigraphy and Empire: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Reading Under Duress', in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Penn State University Press, 2017), pp. 167–83 (p. 174).
[11]Regarding the symbolism and metaphors of underground landscapes, see John Douglas Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (University of Toronto Press, 1990).
[12]Niccolò Scaffai, 'Ecocritica e letteratura', *Arne Naess* ed. by Franco Nasi and Luca Valera, *Riga*, 46 (2023), pp. 303–08 (p. 304).
[13]See Francesco Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura. Rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (Einaudi, 1993).
[14]Roberta Coglitore, *Pietre figurate: Forme del fantastico e mondo minerale* (Edizioni ETS, 2004), p. 22.
[15]*Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Penn State University Press, 2017); David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

this reason, for Adelene Buckand, 'geological science is inherently performative'.[16] Buckland studied how nineteenth-century geology writing borrowed imaginaries and structures from literature: it was not only about plotting the history of the Earth, but finding 'a reliable method for speculating on the unknown worlds that must have existed in an unobservable past'.[17] Geology was the narration of spectacular and unthinkable geographical changes: with the study of rocks and strata, time became visible. Consequently, as similarly noted by Menely and Taylor, 'the literary dimension of geology – a practice of *reading* stratigraphic inscriptions and *narrating* evocative, if improbable, stories – become even more pronounced in the Anthropocene'.[18]

The geological discipline – and its narrativity – tells us that the natural place, often perceived as timeless, is constantly changing. From this perspective, every story has a geography, and history 'is no longer simply the history of people, it becomes the history of natural things as well'.[19] Consequently, then, geology would permit us to keep on imagining and writing the Anthropocene, allowing us not only to envision the spaces and places of the future, but also to locate ourselves in them.

Place as Event: The Politics of Place in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is 'the epoch in which our singular species reads its transformative presence in the Earth's strata, reads *itself* in the rocks, and in doing so establishes new stories about its identity and this planet'.[20] As this definition seems to entail, the Anthropocene constantly requires new practices of elaborations and representations; in other words, it requires new reading practices of place.

On the meaning of space and place, my contribution draws on the theories of Doreen Massey, who conceives space as a process and a product of interrelations. Massey emphasises its inherent plurality, which she defines as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'.[21] Consequently, place is defined as an event: it is 'a collection of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space'.[22] According to Massey, in traditional or common definitions of place, there is usually a reference to a sense of stability; it is also implied that this stability is provided by nature. This sense of locatedness and stasis often has political implications in relation to the territory and a sense of belonging.

Geology has agency in the formation of spatial identity, particularly in relation to a rather static perception and experience of place. In this context, as observed by the geographer Tim Edensor, landmarks serve to organise space and 'create symbolic meanings through which people cognitively articulate a sense of belonging'.[23] Similarly, in her broader study on narratives of rootedness, Christy Wampole focuses on the question of origins in the overlap of nationalism and ecology. For Wampole, 'rootedness is a primary organizing trope that accommodates the need to feel connected to something outside the self'.[24] Thus, the subterranean is often a figure for filiation, connectedness, political allegiance, or symbiosis with the environment. However, according to Massey, 'no longer can a political position be simply grounded in a reading of nature. The invention of our ethics and politics must happen elsewhere'.[25] This is because the conception of place underlying this ethics is flawed. Instead, the place-event must be conceived for its multiple

[16]Buckland, *Novel Science*, p. 255.
[17]Ibid., p. 113.
[18]*Anthropocene Reading*, p. 2.
[19]Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 82.
[20]*Anthropocene Reading*, p. 3.
[21]Massey, *For Space*, p. 9.
[22]Ibid., p. 130.
[23]Tim Edensor, 'The Affective and Sensory Potencies of Urban Stone: Textures and Colours, Commemoration and Geologic Convivialities', *Thesis Eleven*, 172 (2022), pp.16–35 (p. 18), doi:10.1177/07255136221133177.
[24]Christy Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 2.
[25]Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation. Reflections on Moving Mountains', *Journal of Material Culture*, 11 (2006), pp. 33–48 (p. 40), doi:10.1177/1359183506062991.

interrelations: 'the emphasis is on constant movement, the inevitability and inexorability of process [. . .] on flow rather than territory'.[26]

The effects of the Anthropocene and climate change have already shown, once again, not only the arbitrary nature of borders, but also their inevitable transformation in response to ongoing geophysical changes. As an example, the melting of glaciers on the Alps is already influencing the configuration of numerous political boundaries. The concept of the *moving border* imposes a geopolitical and conceptual rethinking of territorial subdivision. As observed by Italian Limes, an artistic project which monitors the changes happening on Alpine glaciers, borders are 'exposed to the complexity of long-term ecological processes, unveiling the problem of spatial representation and its political implication'.[27] It is not only a matter of representation; it is also a question of the conceptualisation of place, and above all, the relationship with it. Literary Geology addresses how literature questions and represents the relationship with place and the identity dynamics assigned to it, as well as the human need for roots and a sense of belonging.

Humanity must be conceived as a geological force; what are its traces in the Anthropocene? In *For Space*, discussing the landscape of the Lake District in relation to the concept of place as an event, Massey refers to geology as the history of the place, and its continuous change. Geology serves as her response to a political and identity-driven use of the sense of place, challenging the notion of place as a fixed entity.[28] Place is 'the product of a meeting up of trajectories out of which mobile uncertainty a future is – has to be – negotiated'.[29] Indeed, the Anthropocene is also a process well located in the present; geographical changes are already underway, extinctions have already occurred. The underground of the Anthropocene has political implications too. Indeed, as argued by Kathryn Yusoff, Geology is not a neutral science, since it 'has been entwined with questions of origins, processes of racialisation through speciation and notions of progress'.[30]

Nonetheless, Geology puts the perception of place also in relation to the concept of planet. In other words, while Geology has, on one hand, legitimised discourses of political and racial inequality, deep-time necessarily relativises and challenges human time and space – and consequently, what we commonly refer to as history and geography. This relativisation has often led to the conception of humans as a species.[31] Even though grounded in egalitarian intentions, this 'biological' vision of humanity, as noted by Elizabeth De Loughrey and Yusoff, runs the risk of producing oversimplified or absolutist narratives of anthropogenesis, overlooking the individual geographical specificities of the Anthropocene.[32] In this sense, in my critical proposal, I believe it is necessary to consider places in their single geographical, political, and cultural characteristics.

The Poetry of Fabio Pusterla

Fabio Pusterla (1957) was born and raised on the frontier zone between Italy and the Canton Ticino, the southernmost canton of Switzerland. In this second part of the article, I focus on the representation of the borderland in Pusterla's poems, analysing his representation and conception

[26]Ibid., p. 40.
[27]*A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change*, ed. by Marco Ferrari, Andrea Bagnato, and Elisa Pasqual (Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 22.
[28]Massey, *For Space*, p. 133. A similar perspective on place is espoused by Federico Luisetti, who, in his *Essere pietra* (Wetlands, 2023), explores the role of nonhuman subjects in indigenous relationships with the environment. The radical otherness of geology allows for a reconsideration of Western political ecologies.
[29]Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation', p. 46.
[30]Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 16.
[31]The underground, fossils, and remains often suggest the consideration of humanity as a species. Pusterla, in his second poetry collection, *Bocksten* (1989), foreshadows this perspective, which has been more openly developed recently by other contemporary Italian poets. In this regard, see Francesco Diaco, 'Esplorando *Betelgeuse*. Tempo profondo e antropocene in Franco Buffoni', *L'ospite ingrato*, 12 (2022), pp. 99–136; and Jacopo Turini, '"Dal profondo mistero evolutivo". Scavi archeo-geologici nella poesia italiana contemporanea', *L'Ulisse*, 24 (2021), pp. 235–46.
[32]See Elizabeth M. De Loughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2019); and Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*.

of place, through what I have called *spaces of collapse* and the figure of transit. Collapse is found both in a geological-natural environment and at the edges of urbanised space, amidst garbage and debris. I believe that the geological perspective, in both these spaces, can be aimed at redefining the role of boundaries via a critique of what they represent and their function. Indeed, just as place is seen as a process, so too is humanity defined by transit and border crossing.

The relationship between space and the geographic and cartographic knowledge of it, as well as the relationship between nation and identity, has historically implied that borders play an active role. National boundaries, borders, and frontiers are conceived as devices for organising and demarcating both space and identity. Regardless of whether the focus is on contact and negotiation or exchange and crossing, nations often perceive borders and frontiers as immutable and fixed entities. In contrast, the poet challenges the stability – be it geographical, political, cultural – that boundaries impose on places through the representation of images of collapse. The concepts of the frontier and the border, which Pusterla considers to be antithetical terms, signifying closure and openness, respectively, are fundamental to the development of his poetic imaginary and his conceptualisation of poetry. Furthermore, they inform his relationship with place: the frontier is a symbol of separation and control, whereas the border is associated with marginal and residual spaces, which give rise to poetry.[33]

Indeed, Pusterla's use of the subterranean world and the geologic matter, as well as his stratigraphic conception of time, sanctions the relativity (or the impossibility) of any privileged or mythical bond with place, and consequently with the narratives, the images, and the elements of *official* history and geography. Rather, the poet often emphasises the role of those signs, ruins, and marginal traces (both human and natural, inscribed in rocks or in strata) that symbolise the possibility of alternative spatiality and temporality, within the structure of place.

The Sign of Erosion

I start with an excerpt of a poem taken from Pusterla's latest book of poetry, *Tremalume* (2022).[34] The text, the first of the four poems entitled 'Aareschlucht' (the name of a limestone gorge in Switzerland), is a clear example of how Pusterla's geological perspective unites place and time:

1.
Tutto è precario tutto è duraturo
qui, nell'incrocio dei tempi, dove nebbie
salgono scendono velano ogni cosa.

[. . .]

Incongruo un masso erratico scuro
sta dentro i boschi fitti: l'ha portato
v. 10 un ghiacciaio scomparso diecimila anni fa.

Tempo del ghiacciaio tempo del granito
corsa dell'acqua che incide le sue gole: un altro ritmo.
Chiusi nel cono d'ombra della cronaca
non vediamo la grandezza della storia;
v. 15 prigionieri della storia ci sorprende
la leggenda di un sasso dilavato,
l'accensione di un'ala, un nubifragio.

[33]See Fabio Pusterla, 'L'inferno è non essere gli altri. Scrittura poetica, traduzione e metamorfosi dell'io', *Quaderns d'Italia*, 7 (2002), pp. 23–29 <https://raco.cat/index.php/QuadernsItalia/article/view/26252> [accessed 14/11/2024].

[34]The texts by Pusterla are presented here in Italian. For translations into English, I refer to Fabio Pusterla, *Days Full of Cave and Tigers*, trans. by Simon Knight (Arc Publications, 2012), which contains texts from 1985 to 2011, and Fabio Pusterla, *Brief Homage to Pluto and Other Poems*, trans. by Will Schutt (Princeton University Press, 2023), which contains texts from 1994 to 2019.

Poi verso sera arriva un elicottero
atterra rosso in un prato. Paramedici
v. 20 corrono in una casa con barella e strumenti.
Un bambino va veloce sopra i monti
nell'aria verso ospedali di città.

Una lama ci ha sfiorato e sugli alberi i rami
più alti tremeranno per molti minuti.
v. 25 Dalla nebbia sbucano quattro caprioli,
corrono saltano nell'erba bagnata,
la pioggia diventa furiosa e fa notte.[35]

The poem presents an alpine scenario, a rocky landscape where different times intersect. Farrier, in his *Anthropocene Poetics*, speaks of a poetics of 'thick time', which refers to 'the lyric's capacity to put multiple temporalities and scales within a single frame, to "thicken" the present with an awareness of other times and places'.[36] Such multiplicity is condensed in the presence of the erratic boulder that makes its appearance from v. 8. Through geologic matter, the poet presents the stratification of different temporalities, the one enclosed by the next: *cronaca*, history, natural time (vv. 13–15). Daily facts prevent us from 'seeing History', which in turn casts a shadow over natural time, which only becomes visible – with an element of surprise – thanks to the erratic boulder, 'incongruous' compared to the rest of the landscape, once dominated by the glacier that brought it there.

The concluding stanzas once again witness the coexistence of different times: the red rescue helicopter (vv. 18–19) represents an element of current events, of immediate urgency – one of those daily facts that overshadow the progression of human time. Nonetheless, the end of the poem returns to natural time and natural scenery, even if, this time, no longer geological. The vibrations of the departing helicopter only make the treetops sway; human figures vanish. Nature reclaims the scene, now occupied by the four roe deers, emerging from the mists that veiled the landscape at the beginning of the poem. Human time, and consequently human space, is disrupted by the representation of the geological place. This intersection of levels brings forth another time, 'another rhythm' (v. 12), which, in relation to human time, signifies the insufficiency of human measurements – and thus of history (as a linear concept) and cartography (or, the world as a flat surface).

Future, too, is not linear progress for Pusterla. Indeed, in 'Amaranthus palmeri', a section of five poems about a plant highly resistant to herbicides, in the book *Argéman* (2014), the poet writes: 'Si parlava del futuro./Come se fosse autostrada, laboratorio/e invece è bruma,/[. . .] somma sempre sbagliata di presenti disattenzioni,/[. . .]/Sassi/sovrapposti, per indicare direzioni ormai inutili [. . .]'.[37] The collapse is therefore conceptual: in particular, the spatial image of the highway, a symbol of progress and movement, leads to no direction, just like the cairns, the stacked stones that now serve as traces of a space where it is no longer possible to orientate oneself.

The idea of the collapse of the future opens the poet's first collection, *Concessione all'inverno*, published in 1985. The first, famous text, 'Le parentesi', is almost a poetic manifesto. It begins under the sign of erosion:

L'erosione
cancellerà le Alpi, prima scavando valli,
poi ripidi burroni, vuoti insanabili
che preludono al crollo, gorghi. Lo scricchiolio
v.5 sarà il segnale di fuga: questo il verdetto.
Rimarranno le pozze, i montaruzzi casuali,
le pause di riposo, i sassi rotolanti,
le caverne e le piane paludose.
Nel Mondo Nuovo rimarranno, cadute
v. 10 principali e alberi sintattici, sperse

[35]Fabio Pusterla, *Tremalume* (Marcos y Marcos, 2022), pp. 171–72.
[36]Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, p. 9.
[37]Fabio Pusterla, *Argéman* (Marcos y Marcos, 2014), p. 181.

certezze e affermazioni,
le parentesi, gli incisi e le interiezioni:
le palafitte del domani.[38]

Within the semantic field of the distant future, here, disaster is both natural, poetic, and linguistic: the Alps will not be able to withstand the erosion, and even poetry will only be able to resist in its most marginal aspects: brackets, parentheses, interjections (v. 12). Marginality is the sign of a new starting point, a new poetic and spatial opportunity. The geological erosion here is not only the modification of matter and geographical change but, above all, the erosion of the cultural as we know it: the concept of place, the human-altered landscape, and language. The 'New World' (v. 9), amidst stilts and parentheses, appears to have reverted to a pre-cultural and prehistoric condition.[39]

Critique to Landmarks

Speaking specifically of a geologically non-local erratic boulder and the illusory fixity of the landscape, Doreen Massey aimed at the problematisation of the notion of local belonging and its political consequences.[40] In Pusterla, if the geological element is a symbol of alternative temporality and spatiality (and new poetic opportunities), a similar but more explicit political critique can be read in the representations of human landmarks as signs of territorial appropriation.

In the section 'Le nevi estive', again taken from *Concessione all'inverno*, the poet notes hidden signs of war and war architecture in Valle del Trodo, a valley in the Swiss-Italian Alps used for military training. In the poem *Der Blaue Bunker (ipotesi sul nemico)*, the poet refers to a bunker in the mountains, and envisions a future where this bunker could be discovered, like an archaeological ruin: 'Poi un giorno sarà riscoperto. / Come i denti / dell'ominide di Agrigento, o le mura di Troia. / Si faranno ipotesi, indebite illazioni. / Qualcuno dirà qui viveva / una volta eccetera eccetera / (Oppure con un po' di fortuna/ci penserà un terremoto a cancellare tutto)'.[41] Here, natural catastrophe is almost invoked – not coincidentally, in parentheses – as a refusal of war and militarised frontiers.

As argued by Amos Nur and Dawn Burgess, natural catastrophes (such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions) have shaped history and civilisations.[42] Dramatic changes of space and place played a role in the formation of both spatial and cultural identities. At the beginning of this process, however, Pusterla's places are still no-man's-lands. In the section 'Sette frammenti dalla terra di nessuno', from the book *Folla sommersa* (2004), the poet writes about a flood which destroyed a mountain village between Switzerland and Italy. I selected the first fragment and some verses from fragments V and VI:

I
Quando piove per molti giorni
la terra scivola via
verso il basso

l'acqua penetra sotto le radici

[38]Fabio Pusterla, *Concessione all'inverno* (Casagrande, 1985; repr. 2012), p. 11.
[39]In his analysis of *Concessione all'inverno*, Davide Dalmas examines the semantic field of collapse and residue in relation to the marginality of poetry and the conclusion, in 1980s Italy, of a poetic era that was more devoted to political engagement. See Dalmas, '*Concessione all'inverno* di Fabio Pusterla: una mossa d'apertura', *I cantieri dell'italianistica. Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo. Atti del XVIII congresso dell'ADI – Associazione degli Italianisti (Padova, 10–13 settembre 2014)*, ed. by Guido Baldassarri, Valeria Di Iasio, Giovanni Ferroni, Ester Pietrobon (Adi editore, 2016), pp. 1–5 <http://www.italianisti.it/Atti-di-Congresso?pg=cms&ext=p&cms_codsec=14&cms_codcms=776> [accessed 20/6/2024]. For an analysis of the residual in *Le parentesi*, see Sabrina Stroppa, '"Ciò che resta". Commento a *Le parentesi* di Fabio Pusterla (da *Concessione all'inverno*)', *Per leggere. Generi della lettura*, xiv, 26 (2016), pp. 121–38.
[40]Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation', p. 35.
[41]Pusterla, *Concessione all'inverno*, p. 80.
[42]Amos Nur and Dawn Burgess, *Apocalypse: Earthquakes, Archaeology, and the Wrath of* God (Princeton University Press, 2008).

arriva alla placca
cambia la storia dei paesaggi

diventa fango e fiume fangoso
travolge i paesi più miseri
gli accampamenti umani

i corpi e ogni cosa che ostacola
o resiste.[43]

V
[. . .]
[*terra*] Di nessuno e per questo di tutti, tra bandiere
alte sopra i patiboli, frontiere
di ferro e di mestizia: non oltre e non altrove,
ma qui, dove restiamo
in silenzio, cose
tra cose, poveri animali
quasi schiacciati dalle nuvole gonfie di pioggia,
più sotto, dunque, più in basso: qui,
sulla terra bagnata, nel fango.[44]

VI
[. . .] Il movimento
Impercettibile delle faglie, le pietre che cadono
[. . .]
No, non sono loro a franare, è la storia
nostra, e le nostre strade
Aere italico MDCCCV Nap. Imp.
di speranza e di gloria. Le montagne
parlano la lingua del mare e delle stelle,
lingua di *quelle*
remote età geològiche
che sèmbrano ancora un sogno dell'immaginazione,
un'altra lingua in cui ogni cosa è uguale
e necessaria, esatta e inessenziale, e tutto varia
col variare del tutto. [45]

In the first text, water is an agent of a mobile geography, an element that destroys and alters 'the history of landscapes' (vv. 6–11). If, in stanza V, the land is divided by 'high flags above the gallows [and] borders of iron and sadness' the flood is what turns it into a no-man's land: 'belonging to no one, and therefore, to everyone' (vv. 20–22). In the next fragment, VI, referring again to rocks and landslides, the reference to the resounding Latin inscription and to Napoleon represents a landmark bound to lose meaning and collapse. It is not the geological material that crumbles, but human history; mountains, in fact, are part of a different and remote world, existing within a temporality that is only perceptible as a dream of the imagination (v. 23).

The Border Place. Layers and Planes

A similar critique of territorial appropriation and the border as a creator of identity is expressed in the other space of collapse, that is the suburban frontier zone around the train tracks of the Swiss border-town of Chiasso. The Swiss-Italian border, which in this part develops especially along commercial rail tracks, is depicted as a *terrain vague*, an ecosystem 'of confrontation and contamination between the organic and the inorganic, between nature and artifice [that] constitute the

[43]Fabio Pusterla, *Folla sommersa* (Marcos y Marcos, 2004), p. 18.
[44]Pusterla, *Folla sommersa*, p. 22.
[45]Pusterla, *Folla sommersa*, pp. 24–25.

city's negative, the interstitial and the marginal, spaces abandoned or in the process of transformation'.[46] The Swiss-Italian border area is a banal and everyday place, rendered identity-less by the presence of the border, which delineates space and regulates passage.

Thus, the collapse is not a scenery brought by natural disaster, but rather is a result of an urban or semi-urban area that is abandoned and in ruins. Here, flora and fauna coexist with debris and human waste, deeply rooted and inscribed in the layers of soil. The geological element in this space, however, is not solely confined to the underground, the stone, or a different temporality, but, in general, it reveals to the poet the vertical dimension of space, its depth, and its stratification – in implicit opposition to the *horizontal* separation imposed and structured by the border. In the essay 'Primo paesaggio', collected in the book *Quando Chiasso era in Irlanda*, Pusterla writes about his wanderings in the *terrain vague* of the border. In the following passage, the poet describes the place by inscribing it within the flow of geological time:

> In antiche ere geologiche la breve pianura in cui correvamo, e le colline lì attorno, erano state il fondo di un mare, di cui ancora rimanevano impronte fossili in una cava di argilla poco distante, ammoniti racchiuse nell'argilla [. . .]. Oggi: pozzanghere, capaci di rimanere lì per mesi, visto il poco sole, per poi raggrumarsi in terra screpolata, giallognola, dura. Dal mare alle pozzanghere: un'asfissia progressiva [. . .] dentro la quale non avrebbe davvero avuto senso nessun moto di nostalgia. Nostalgia di che cosa, poi? Il mondo era già questo reticolo di strade e merci [. . .].[47]

The geological awareness is, initially, the premonition of a temporal complexity of space, in a place increasingly suffocated ('from ocean to puddles') by the border and the network of goods sorted at the Chiasso railway customs. Despite this, geology does not represent any mystical or identity-related connection with the territory. Rather, it is a perspective, a way of seeing that begins to question, for the young poet, not only the concepts of time and place but also the grounding of identity in nature.

In the representation of the derelict border ecosystem, the collapse also pertains to the human measurement and organisation of time and space. The critique of the frontier becomes increasingly explicit: the border place expresses a perennial condition of fragmentation, of loss of identity, as in the poem 'Paesaggio', in *Le cose senza storia* (1994):

[. . .]
Ogni frantume è ammesso purché inutile.

Siccome questo è il vuoto c'è posto per tutto,
E quel poco che c'è, è come se non ci fosse.
Anche i binari sono perfettamente inerti,
le lucertole immobili, i vagoni
dimenticati.

E poi il pollaio. Le cose senza storia.
O fuori. Una carriola
che non ha ruote. Un pozzo. Un secchio marcio
privo di fondo. [. . .]
[. . .] Piume dentro la rete, di gallina.
Buchi dentro la rete. Trame rotte.
Quello che non chiamate crudeltà.

Io sono questo: niente.
Voglio quello che sono, fortemente.
E le parole: nessuno adesso me le ruberà.[48]

The poet critiques exclusionary dynamics brought by the border: the net (of the chicken coop, but clearly a symbol of the frontier) is an element of cruelty (v. 25). In this text, the poet associates

[46] *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale*, ed. by Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron (Routledge, 2014), p. 2.
[47] Fabio Pusterla, *Quando Chiasso era in Irlanda – e altre avventure tra libri e realtà* (Casagrande, 2012), pp. 14–15.
[48] Fabio Pusterla, *Le cose senza storia* (Marcos y Marcos, 1994; repr. 2007), pp. 43–44.

himself and his poetry with fragments and discarded objects – up to the declaration of being 'nothing' (v. 26), an absolute denial of identity. Only in this nothingness, therefore, is there a possibility of expression (v. 28). The border place is thus depicted as a landscape of fragments, valued in their uselessness and in their being 'things with no history' (v. 19). This verse, which serves as the title of the collection, significantly delineates the poet's conception of history and, consequently, of place. The progressive equation waste-poetry-poetic I is therefore situated beyond the trajectory of history, 'admitted' (v. 13) to an alternative space, a 'void' full of everything (v. 14). The poet is thus drawn to a place where the impact of human history – once again understood as progress, territorial appropriation and functionalisation – is absent, or revealed through its scrap.

The area around Chiasso is depicted as a stifling, identity-less place, stripped of meaningful local features due to its complete functionalization by the border. However, the poet does not seek to reclaim the place's lost identity from the past. Instead, he discovers meaning in its very absence, identifying a spatial and poetic alternative in the margins and discarded elements. Place is perceived as a continuous flow where space and time intersect constantly, as described in the essay 'Sottopassaggi', where Pusterla examines the border location with a gaze that is both horizontal and vertical:

> C'era dunque un incrocio di piani, di linee, di vie; [un] incrocio di mondi e realtà, improvvisamente messi in contatto l'uno con l'altro. In alto passavano i treni, più sopra ancora gli aerei [...] qua sotto correvano automobili [...]. C'erano pietra e ferro, terra e erba; sulla scarpata si potevano trovare rari fiori e persino dei funghi, oggetti smarriti e pagine di giornale; e una volta [...] apparve una scarpa spaiata [...] che apriva con la sua immotivata presenza lo scrigno dell'immaginazione e delle ipotesi.[49]

The poet-pedestrian observes the stratification of passing vehicles such as cars, trains, and aeroplanes, from his position in the underpass. The author's gaze is thus from below, situated within the static materiality of the border area, made of stone, iron, and grass, littered with trash or flowers and mushrooms. The stratigraphic perspective thus demonstrates the existence of a multiplicity of stories and realities, both as a result of the intersection of planes and means of transport, and as a consequence of the incongruous materiality of the border place, which stimulates narrative hypotheses and poetic imagination.

This multi-layered perspective on the place is also evident in the third poem of the section 'Sotto il giardino', again from *Le cose senza storia*. The poet's vertical perspective on the border place opens out to the subterranean too:

L'alto bosco assediato, il sottopasso,
una discesa di castagne e rottami.
Più in basso, treni merci palpitavano.
E in mezzo pensa a un fuoco,
v. 5 gente che brucia stoppie in un mese autunnale,
luce di piombo e felci,
ippocastani. Ma era vita, credo,
era vita anche questa, di radici
sbilenche, incaprettate,
v. 10 oppure la durezza di un pignone,
il suo dover girare. Nessuno, pensavamo,
guarderà queste strade come noi.
Salamandre, gatti ciechi, rotaie,
moltissime ricchezze.[50]

The forest landscape is described as being 'besieged' (v. 1) by human encroachment, symbolised by the underpass, freight trains, debris, and the anthropized countryside where people burn stubble (vv. 2–5). This establishes a stratigraphic perspective, as the poet's gaze descends from the forest and tracks to the ground, where new 'things with no history' emerge as signs of alternative forms of life

[49]Pusterla, *Quando Chiasso*, pp. 165–66.
[50]Pusterla, *Le cose senza storia*, p. 18.

among the rubble (v. 7). These elements, referred to as 'riches' (v. 14), are regarded with wonder by the poet and others like him. The poet's connection to this environment, however, does not symbolise a privileged or primordial bond with place. Rather, the roots, like the forgotten cogs (vv. 8–11), serve to reaffirm the vital, narrative and poetic potential of the waste and subterranean realm.

Crossings. Place as Transit

The critique of the border space, as well as the representation of natural disasters and the destruction of territorial landmarks, serve as examples of how, for Pusterla, place should not be perceived or represented as a fixed entity. Human connection with the territory is not solely organised around elements of stability, boundaries, or belonging (albeit challenged). This connection aligns with the concept of place-as-process and, consequently, it also revolves around alternative spatiality, such as figures of border-crossing and transit.

For instance, in the poet's second book, *Bocksten* (1989), geologic deep-time can be once again read as the rejection of any privileged relationship with the territory. The main theme of *Bocksten* is the subterranean; however, not strictly in a geological sense, but rather archaeological. The poems revolve around the rediscovery of early medieval human remains found in a Swedish peat bog. These remains belonged to a murdered man, whose body has now become a fragmented fossil – who speaks in first person in many texts. Thus, in this poetry collection, the focus is not on the Swiss-Italian border, nor on a specific place; nonetheless, it reiterates the poet's views on the human relationship with space and time.[51]

History is not a linear process; rather, it appears as an eternal return of violence: 'Eccole qui le ossa, biancheggianti,/e il senso ischeletrito/della vita: e della storia/e tutta la sua corte/di omicidi e cateteri, stampelle'.[52] Such a perspective on human history also affects the relationship with place. Human remains witness a different passage of time:

> [. . .]
> Se ci ritroveremo, sarà per non conoscerci,
> diversi nei millenni, nella storia
> faticosa di tutti; e intanto arretrano
> i ghiacciai, s'inghiotte il mare
> lo stretto, ed il passaggio
> è già troppo profondo, impronunciabile,
> sepolto nel passato il tuo viaggio. [. . .][53]

History is communal, but there is a rupture with human temporalities, which are now fully geological – as exemplified by the images of the glacier and the flows of the land and the sea (vv. 5–6). The *Bockstensmannen* – this the name given to the murdered medieval man – is not a mythical ancestor, nor the progenitor of a genealogy. His remains are used as elements revealing humanity as a community always on the move (v. 8), leaving nothing in space and in time but engravings and frail traces of itself.

The concept of place as a dynamic process becomes evident in its influence on the human dimension, shaping both spatial and political aspects, manifested through the acts of travel and transit:

> La mia gente è di un popolo che parte,
> non lascia tracce o resti dentro il tempo

[51]For a comprehensive examination of *Bocksten*, which emphasises the interconnection between individual biography (the book is dedicated to Pusterla's father) and collective history, please see Beatrice Manetti. 'Il "libro del figlio": *Bocksten* di Fabio Pusterla (1989)', *La poesia italiana degli anni Ottanta. Esordi e conferme II*, ed. by Sabrina Stroppa (Pensa Multimedia, 2017), pp. 211–33.
[52]Fabio Pusterla, *Bocksten* (Marcos y Marcos, 1989; repr. 2003), p. 31.
[53]Pusterla, *Bocksten*, p. 12.

degli altri. Solo, su certi massi,
paure, animali, barche,
v.5 il poco che abbiamo avuto. [. . .] [54]

The fossil leaves no significant traces in historical time, which indeed is the 'time of others' (vv. 2–3). The only faint traces are related to mobility and flow, which thus becomes a general condition of humanity. For the poet, humanity does not become aware and conscious of itself and its space in the world by means of boundaries and limits, but primarily from crossing or encroaching upon them.

In *Gli ultimi cenni del custode delle acque*, a group of poems published as a standalone collection in 2016 and subsequently incorporated into the book *Cenere, o terra* (2018), Pusterla addresses the theme of contemporary and future migrations. By presenting a further representation of natural catastrophe in the Swiss-Italian border area, the poet shows the vulnerability of borders and of their exclusionary function, in the face of geophysical and geopolitical changes, as well as the emergence of new temporalities:

[. . .]
In questa parte del mondo
Si usano i corsi d'acqua per dividere,
v. 5 i laghi per fondare città,
per difendersi. [. . .]

Dietro i boschi altri boschi, e confini.
Volti di luna ammassati alle sbarre,
v. 10 privazioni. Gli altri, che passano oltre,
traversano il deserto,
desolati e furiosi come un'acqua
assetata, che preme
contro le paratie, che minaccia

v. 15 la diga.
Chi nega il flusso sa che cosa rischia?
Il rombo sarà terribile. La spiga
Del lutto crescerà sulle rovine.[55]

In the first stanza, water serves as a reference point for bordering practices, defence and territorial control; the mention of lakes in v. 3 once again alludes to the Swiss-Italian territory. In the following stanzas, the reference to borders as elements of geographies of inequality and deprivation is explicit. However, the illusion of exclusionary stability cannot withstand the impending geographical changes. People in transit, amassed at the borders, are likened to water that threatens to overwhelm every barrier and dam (vv. 9–15). This imagery, which might imply hostility towards the passage of human beings, is actually conceived as a threat to those who attempt to resist the flow. In another poem from the same section, the poet writes: 'Non ci sarà pietà/per chi pietà ha negato/l'acqua si chiuderà/tutto sarà sparito'.[56]

The word *transit* embodies both the passage of time and border crossing. Transit symbolises the dynamic perception of place influenced by the temporalities and the geographies of the Anthropocene. Once again, in Pusterla's work, whether it is natural disasters, stratigraphic perspectives, or specific considerations of the subterranean world, the geological element demonstrates that the reading and the representation of place cannot ignore the consideration of humanity's relationships with it, the traces it leaves, and the political choices it makes.

[54]Pusterla, *Bocksten*, p. 67.
[55]Fabio Pusterla, *Cenere, o terra* (Marcos y Marcos, 2018), p. 135.
[56]Pusterla, *Cenere, o terra*, p. 145.

Conclusion

Borders serve as a *historical* testament to human organisation and conception of space. In contrast, geological insights complicate the topography of borders, exposing and rendering visible different temporal layers that challenge any claims of control over territory and time. The work of Fabio Pusterla, as I have analysed, demonstrates that the representation and the idea of history and geography as linear, flat, and progressive concepts, collapse when confronted with geologic matter and perspective. In examining Pusterla's spaces of collapse, I sought to elucidate how geology serves as a lens through which the poet reads and represents the place within a fluid perspective. This challenges the fixity of place, and the features of both cultural and physical geography (e.g., landmarks, borders) that uphold and promote this fixity. For Pusterla, signs hidden in the rocks and the soil, the margins and the waste, as well as the traces of the passage of human community redefine both the identity of a place and the sense of space.

In the Anthropocene, which can be understood as a complex and ongoing series of geographical processes, the understanding and representation of space – whether through geography, cartography, or maps – and the connection to places – in terms of history, identity, and genealogy – demand new tools, methods, and approaches: new political conceptions of place and relationships with it. Literary Geology interprets place as an ongoing collection of stories, politics, and relations, considering both nature and discourses of roots, belonging, grounding in nature – as well as these discourses' transience. Indeed, place (specific sites as much as nations, etc) is also considered both as a political and discursive process: it is 'utterly relational, existing as an assemblage of relations that meld past, present, and future and incorporates the human and non-human, the inorganic and the organic'.[57] In light of the above, I believe Literary Geology provides a valuable framework for examining the temporalities and narratives embedded in geological matter, in order to understand and navigate the changes of the Anthropocene, and find the traces of new relational geographies.

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[57]Tim Edensor, *Stone: Stories of Urban Materiality* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020), p. 305.